

MARR AREA BUS FORUM

MINUTES OF MEETING ON THURSDAY 20TH SEPTEMBER 2018

ALFORD TOWN HALL, ALFORD

In Attendance

Councillor R. Withey (Aberdeenshire Council) (Chair)

Councillor J. Latham (Aberdeenshire Council)

Councillor P. Gibb (Aberdeenshire Council)

Vivika Kerridge (Deeside Community Council)

Nicola Sedgwick (Donside Community Council)

Jeanie Rowand (Bus User)

Betty Henry (Bus User)

Ann Stephen (Bus User)

Alexina Grant (Bus User)

W. Williams (Bus User)

Edna Leavitt (Bus User)

Elde Ewen (Bus User)

Geoffrey Seaber

Roland Armbruszt (Bus Driver)

Graeme Leslie (Operations Director, Stagecoach North Scotland)

Neil Stewart (Principal Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

Susan Watt (Senior Transport Officer, Aberdeenshire Council)

Apologies

Councillor M. Ingleby (Aberdeenshire Council)

Steven Murray

1. Welcome and Introduction

Councillor Withey welcomed everyone to the meeting and introductions were given.

2. Minutes of the Meeting on 18th April 2018

The Minutes were approved.

3. Matters Arising from the Minutes

Graeme Leslie provided the following update on behalf of Stagecoach Bluebird:

- 3.1 In response to the claim that the 1630 hours ex Aberdeen - Ballater (Service 202) operated 30 minutes late on 16th April 2018, he confirmed that the original vehicle had developed a coolant leak, so it had to be replaced, resulting in the journey departing 12 minutes late from Union Square Bus Station.

3.2 Regarding journeys on Services 201/202/203 (Aberdeen - Ballater/Braemar) which can carry bicycles, he advised that this hadn't been actioned yet but consultation was being undertaken. He added that it may be easier to identify those journeys which are normally *not* able to carry bicycles.

3.3 In response to the request for reduced fares for people between 16 and 18 years of age, he confirmed that Stagecoach Bluebird have discounted fares for under 19s available on-line.

It was raised from the floor that there should be discounted fares for 18-20 year olds attending college, as Young Scot card only provides for those travelling for work purposes.

Graeme Leslie advised of the Unirider discounted fares available for students.

3.4 In response to the request to fill the 5.5 hour gap between Torphins and Aberdeen (Monday to Friday) (Service 202), he confirmed that the proposed changes for November 2018 include an 1851 hours departure from Torphins to Aberdeen (1745 hrs ex Braemar).

3.5 In response to the request for re-instatement of the peak Service X10 return journey between Huntly and Aberdeen, which bypassed Inverurie, (currently 06:53 hours ex Huntly and 17:45 hours ex Aberdeen), he confirmed that this was considered but ruled out on commercial grounds.

3.6 In response to the request for Stagecoach to re-evaluate the journey times on peak journeys on Service 10 (Aberdeen - Inverness), as buses frequently have to wait for up to 15 minutes in Inverurie or Port Elphinstone to ensure that they do not run ahead of the scheduled timetable, he confirmed that it is difficult to account for fluctuating traffic levels, in particular the variance between schooldays and non-schooldays, but a comprehensive review will be carried out post AWPR completion.

3.7 In response to the request for the 2 hour gap in the am peak from Huntly to Aberdeen (Service 10) (between 0653 hours and 0842 hours ex Huntly) to be filled, as it was claimed that the first journey has insufficient capacity, he confirmed that monitoring of the 0653 hours departure had not highlighted any capacity problems. He added that the 0842 hours ex Huntly to Aberdeen will be advanced to depart at 0832 hours in November 2018.

3.8 In response to the claim regarding insufficient capacity provided on the 1545 hours and 1645 hours ex Aberdeen - Inverness (Service 10) due to passengers boarding and alighting within the City and also within Inverurie, resulting in longer distance passengers being unable to board at Aberdeen Royal Infirmary and Bucksburn Police Station, he confirmed that revisions to Services 37/X37 (Aberdeen – Inverurie) in November 2018 are designed to alleviate such problems and the situation will continue to be monitored.

3.9 In response to the request for further limitations on the number of stops used by Service 10, he confirmed that there are no plans to do this at this time.

3.10 In response to the claim that a smaller bus was allocated to the 1145 hours ex Aberdeen - Braemar on 17 April 2018, he confirmed this to be true and apologised for the late replacement, which was due to a breakdown. He confirmed that coaches are only replaced in cases of breakdowns or essential maintenance, to ensure the journey is operated, but he also acknowledged that such occurrences have been too frequent on the Deeside corridor and this matter is being discussed at senior management level within the company.

4. Stagecoach Bluebird Update

Graeme Leslie confirmed the following:

4.1 Following a review, various service proposals have been the subject of public consultation ending on 21 September 2018. He confirmed that the proposals are primarily to take account of punctuality and reliability issues on the corridors and the implementation date was 12 November 2018 (subsequently postponed until 19 November 2018). He referred to the services below, which operate across the Marr Area.

- Service 37/X37 (Aberdeen - Inverurie)
- Service 10 (Aberdeen - Inverness)
- Service 201/202/203 (Aberdeen - Banchory - Braemar)

He also confirmed that existing Service 747 (Peterhead/Ellon – Aberdeen Airport) is proposed to operate via the AWPR from Blackdog to the airport and on to Stonehaven, then Montrose via A92, on an approximate hourly basis, also serving Craibstone and Kingswells Park & Ride sites. (Note: Implementation subsequently postponed).

5. Aberdeenshire Council Update

Neil Stewart referred to the handout (also provided separately) and gave the following update:

5.1 Transport Focus undertakes an annual Bus Passenger Survey (BPS) and, whilst the 2016 survey was funded by Transport Scotland, the Regional Transport Partnerships (RTPs) and operators, the 2017 survey was funded by the main national operators based upon their operational areas and not, as previously was the case, geographically based on the RTP regions.

For north east Scotland, this was therefore primarily a survey of Stagecoach Bluebird and First Aberdeen routes, but the former's City services were not included on this occasion.

Supplementary funding from Nestrans enabled Transport Focus to extract the relevant results for Aberdeenshire and enhance the Aberdeenshire responses, with additional samples taken from further Stagecoach routes and a supported service route operated by MW Nicoll. The resultant survey was undertaken between 11 September and 17 December 2017, and comprised 649 users in Aberdeenshire.

The principal finding of the autumn 2017 BPS was that Aberdeenshire bus users showed an increased level of satisfaction with the overall service, and also in 25 of the 33 specific aspects of bus service delivery, compared with the spring 2016 BPS.

Overall positive satisfaction with Bus Service Delivery increased by 2%, with the most significant increases (i.e. > +5%) being recorded in the categories of Punctuality (+7%), Length of Time Waiting for a Bus (+7%), Personal Safety at Bus Stop (+9%), Ease of Getting On and Off Bus (+7%), Time Taken to Board the Bus (+8%) and Nearness to Kerb (+8%).

Comparisons with the Nestrans area

The Aberdeenshire results compare favourably with the Nestrans area as a whole in most of the specific categories, the most significant differences in responses relating to driver behaviour, with positive satisfaction in Aberdeenshire outscoring that for the Nestrans area as a whole in the categories of Greeting/Welcome from Driver (+9%), Helpfulness of Driver (+7%) and Time Given to Get to Your Seat (+7%).

Positive satisfaction levels in Aberdeenshire also exceeded those in the Nestrans area as a whole by more than 5% in the categories of Information at Bus Stop (+6%), Personal Safety at Bus Stop (+6%), Smoothness of Journey (+6%) and Interior Cleanliness/Condition of Bus (+6%).

Comparisons with the English rural authorities

Benchmarking of local satisfaction levels was undertaken for each service delivery category against seven comparable English rural authorities covered by the same 2017 Transport Focus BPS, namely Cornwall, County Durham, Norfolk, Northamptonshire, Northumberland, Oxfordshire and Worcestershire.

Positive satisfaction levels for Aberdeenshire exceeded those for the benchmark English rural county authorities in the Transport Focus 2017 BPS in 25 of the 32 categories where like for like comparisons could be made.

Positive satisfaction levels in Aberdeenshire were more than 5% greater than the average across the seven English rural authorities in the categories of Personal Safety at Bus Stop (+8%), Freedom of Graffiti/Vandalism at Bus Stop (+6%), Freedom of Litter at Bus Stop (+6%), Overall Satisfaction with Bus Stop (+6%), Interior Cleanliness/Condition of Bus (+6%) and Comfort of the Seats (+6%).

The English rural authorities, on average, scored significantly higher than Aberdeenshire in only 3 categories, these being Value for Money (+7%), Ease of Getting On and Off Bus (+7%) and Provision of Grab Rails on Bus (+10%), the latter two results suggesting that buses are more accessible in other comparable areas of the UK.

6. Bus Service Requests/Development

Neil Stewart referred to the papers circulated, detailing pending and fulfilled service requests in the Marr Area, all of which had already been discussed during the meeting.

- 6.1 The request for Service 218 (Alford – Aberdeen) to operate via Straik Road, Wellgrove Road, Skene Road and Westhill Drive (Westhill) to serve the centre of Westhill was fulfilled by on 8 May 2018.

7. Public Transport Infrastructure/Information

Neil Stewart welcomed requests for bus stops, bus shelters and related infrastructure.

- 7.1 Thanks were expressed from the floor regarding the new bus shelter installed in Alford.
- 7.2 Councillor Gibb queried whether the Real Time screens display scheduled or arrival times, highlighting that tracking on the Service 201/202/203 corridor was unreliable.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the Real Time screens should display the actual arrival times, however the Council is aware of issues with the system, particularly on the Deeside corridor. He confirmed that a meeting is to be arranged between the operators, the supplier and the local authority to discuss how these issues can be rectified.

- 7.3 Complaint regarding vehicles parking in the bus stops at Auchendryne Square (Braemar) and Golf Road (Ballater), resulting in buses being unable to gain access.

Councillor Withey asked the complainant to speak with himself and Councillor Gibb following the meeting regarding this, so it can be investigated by the appropriate Council officers.

- 7.4 Query as to why there is no publicity regarding the Bus Forum at the Main Street Interchange (Alford) outside the Cheery Cup café.

Susan Watt apologised and confirmed that this should have been actioned.

- 7.5 Request for installation of hard standing at the two bus stops in Hill of Banchory, at and opposite the Deeside Dance Centre.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be investigated.

8. Service 201/202/203 (Aberdeen - Banchory - Ballater - Braemar)

- 8.1 Repeated complaints regarding poor quality vehicles being allocated to the corridor, resulting in frequent non running and breakdowns. Issues raised were:

- door mechanism not operating correctly and drivers at times having to kick the door to allow passengers to board and alight
- warning lights flashing inside the vehicle
- smell of diesel inside the vehicle
- faulty heating systems

Graeme Leslie did not dispute any of the claims and acknowledged that breakdowns and faults have occurred. He advised that the Company has appointed a new engineering manager as well as a fleet manager, and this should improve reliability on the corridor.

There was an assertion from the floor that these issues have been raised at previous meetings, with no improvements in reliability being realised.

- 8.2 Repeated claim regarding a lack of consistency of vehicles on the corridor, including the use of 'urban-type' buses which are considered uncomfortable for travelling on such routes, and have insufficient capacity for some journeys.

Graeme Leslie referred to his earlier comments but acknowledged that there has a higher than normal allocation of other types of vehicles on the corridor.

- 8.3 The following matters were raised from both the floor, and Councillor Gibb on behalf of his constituents:

- Claim regarding insufficient seating capacity being provided throughout the p.m. peak period from Aberdeen due to passengers boarding and alighting within the City.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that the service is registered to carry passengers from origins and to destinations within Aberdeen, as well as within the City, as this contributes to the commercial viability of the service, including the frequency provided.

- Request for more journeys to operate direct via A93 through Banchory, instead of serving various parts of Banchory town, to provide a faster service for those travelling longer distances on the corridor.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that the above also applies to passengers within the town of Banchory, confirming that there is significant usage from areas such as Hill of Banchory.

- Destination boards are confusing to passengers with buses to Braemar showing Banchory in large font.

Graeme Leslie explained that in order to comply with drivers' hours regulations, the services are registered as 3 sections on the Deeside corridor, hence Banchory being the principal destination on the first outbound section from Aberdeen, but the display should still show *Banchory for Braemar (or Ballater)*.

- Request for investment in higher quality coaches on the corridor.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that the company's vehicle procurement procedure involves the submission of bids annually to the parent company (Stagecoach Group) in Perth each year. He advised that, whilst new vehicles were last allocated to the corridor 10 years ago, newer vehicles had been cascaded down from other routes, such as Service 10 (Aberdeen - Inverness) and the company introduced DDA (Disability Discrimination Act) compliant vehicles 2 years in advance of deadlines.

- Query as to whether Aberdeen City Council provides any subsidies on the corridor.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that no subsidies are received from Aberdeen City Council, whilst Neil Stewart confirmed that Aberdeenshire Council subsidises the Ballater - Braemar section, as well as some evening journeys to/from Aberdeen, including the last bus.

- Query as to where Deeside passenger may be able to link up with the proposed Service 747 (see also 4.1 above).

Graeme Leslie advised that there are currently no plans to link up with the Deeside corridor

8.4 Query as to why Stagecoach Bluebird is the only operator on the corridor.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that any suitably qualified bus and/or coach operator can decide to register a local bus service with the Traffic Commissioner.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the subsidised part of the corridor (mentioned above), as well as all local bus services contracted to the Council, were subject to competitive tender. He also advised that there is a Transport (Scotland) Bill which includes proposed measures such as providing local authorities with the flexibility to improve bus services through partnership working with operators.

9. Service 422 (Insch – Alford)

- 9.1 Request for additional journeys in the peak and inter-peak to provide connections with rail services at Insch, in particular for those travelling for work purposes.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that the current service, which does not receive subsidy, essentially comprises positional journeys for buses operating to and from the company's Insch depot, so it is unlikely that this request can be fulfilled. He added, for example, that the buses in the morning are travelling south to Alford, the opposite direction of travel to that requested. He also advised that at times, the route between Alford and Insch can be impassable due to extreme winter weather conditions.

- 9.2 Query as to whether subsidy can be provided by Aberdeenshire Council to provide additional journeys on the route.

Neil Stewart advised that the Council currently subsidises Service 218 (Aberdeen - Westhill - Alford), which is covered by vehicles also operating as Service 422 between Alford and Insch, but he confirmed that in view of the funding situation, the provision of subsidy could not be considered unless there is a very significant demand for specific journeys. He also advised that several years ago the Scottish Government had introduced a Rural Transport Fund which allowed local authorities to trial new and/or improved rural services for a number of years, but such funding is no longer available.

10. Donside Area

- 10.1 Request for more services to cater for the Glenkindie area, with the comment that current provision is "not fit for purpose", highlighting the social needs of residents, in particular young people and those with mental health issues.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the Council's budget for public transport services has decreased over the last 2 years and any additional services such as dial-a-bus would need to be at the expense of other existing services elsewhere in Aberdeenshire. (For information, Strathdon A2B dial-a-bus was withdrawn in 2017 due to extremely low usage)

Councillor Gibb advised that there is a website relating to car sharing in rural communities, which may be more appropriate (www.blablacar.com)

- 10.2 Request for faster journey times on Service 218 (Aberdeen – Alford).

Neil Stewart confirmed that the service was previously routed via the outskirts of Westhill to provide the fastest possible journey time to/from Aberdeen, but so many requests were received for the service to operate via the centre of Westhill, that this was implemented earlier this year. He pointed out that the service is limited stop between Kingswells Park & Ride and Aberdeen. He also advised that the service previously operated on an approximate hourly basis as the subsidised element was supplemented by journeys operated on a commercial basis by Stagecoach. However, due to limited passenger demand, these commercial journeys were withdrawn and the service it is now wholly subsidised and is operated by one vehicle.

- 10.3 Claim that the 0842 hours ex Alford – Aberdeen (Service X20) broke down this morning (20 September 2018), resulting in passengers having to wait in Kemnay for an hour.

Graeme Leslie confirmed that this would be investigated.

(Response received post meeting from Stagecoach: Journey departed Alford on time but suffered a breakdown in Kemnay at 0920 hours due to gear issues. One of the company's mechanics attended the vehicle and the service resumed at 0957 hours, operating into Aberdeen. Delay was 30-35 mins.)

11. **A.O.B**

- 11.1 Request for future meetings to be extended by 30 minutes to finish at 2130 hours.

Neil Stewart confirmed that this would be considered.

- 11.2 Query as to how the Council monitors subsidised services.

Neil Stewart confirmed that all subsidised services are monitored through information via the electronic ticket machines on the buses, supplemented by on bus passenger surveys. He explained that information on these services is stored in a Performance Management Framework Model, which ranks them in order of priority, taking into account a number of factors in addition to actual usage, such as cost per passenger, car ownership and deprivation levels in the area served, etc.

- 11.3 Complaint regarding the Marr area Bus Forum only being held in Alford every 18 months.

Councillor Withey confirmed that people can contact himself or Councillor Latham if they have comments regarding the Alford area and these will be discussed with bus operators and/or the Passenger Transport Unit (For information the other Councillors in the Huntly, Strathbogie and Howe of Alford Ward are Councillor Moira Ingleby and Councillor Gwyneth Petrie).

(Also for information, anyone wishing to attend the next meeting in Aboyne can contact the Council in advance, as the PTU can arrange transport to/from meetings)

- 11.4 Query as to whether the Council is getting value for money from Stagecoach Bluebird with around £1 million in annual subsidy provided to the company in the Marr Area.

Neil Stewart confirmed that the figure covers not only the Marr Area, but also other Areas over which the services operate. (Note: Actual figure currently £773k). He explained that the Council provides over £3 million annually towards subsidised local bus and dial-a-bus services in Aberdeenshire and that the local authority's responsibility is to identify travel needs which are not otherwise met by the commercial network, and subsidised services are principally aimed at satisfying unmet social needs. He expressed the view that, on the whole, the Council is getting value for money but stressed that it meets regularly with the operators to discuss potential improvements and also penalises them for failing to comply with contract specifications.

12. **Date of Next Meeting**

Councillor Withey advised that the next meeting of the Area Bus Forum will be held in Aboyne in spring 2019.